

Session 12: The Anchor Holds

Presumption, despair, and the assurance a Catholic really has

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers hope as a real theological virtue standing between two opposite sins, presumption and despair; discovers that Peter committed the first before his fall and Judas the second after his; and finally receives the answer to the verse parked on the very first night: what 1 John 5:13's "that you may know" gives a Christian, and what kind of assurance a Catholic really has.

Catholic Touchstone. "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1817). Its two opposite sins are defined with the Catechism's own precision tonight (CCC 2091-2092), and its promise is total: "In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere 'to the end' and to obtain the joy of heaven" (CCC 1821, in substance).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study pays its oldest debt. On night one, someone may have raised, or you parked preemptively, 1 John 5:13: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **that you may know that you have eternal life**." Eleven sessions of honest warnings later, the group has earned the full answer, and it is better than either caricature. Read John's letter whole and watch what "know" is built from: John supplies tests, present-tense and observable: "by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (2:3); "we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (3:14); "by this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit" (4:13). John's assurance is real, present, and *diagnostic*: you may know you **have** (present tense) eternal life, the way a healthy person knows they are alive: by the pulse, not by a certificate about the future. It coexists in one canon, and one apostle's worldview, with "let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall," because knowing you are alive today and presuming you cannot die are different acts of the mind.

Give the group the three-certainties framework; it resolves years of confusion in one breath. (1) **Certainty of God's promises: absolute.** God's fidelity, Christ's work, the efficacy of the sacraments: not probabilities. "Hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:5); hope is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb 6:19), sure because of where it is fastened: "behind the curtain," in heaven itself, where Jesus has entered. (2) **Certainty of my present state: real and moral, by examination.** "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith" (2 Cor 13:5) is a command, so it must be possible; John's tests are the exam; absolution is its sacrament (Session 9: audible forgiveness is a datum, not a guess). (3) **Certainty about my own future free choices: this is hoped and prayed for, not possessed.** And name Trent's limits precisely: absent special revelation, no one has *certitude of faith*, the kind that cannot err, either that he presently stands in grace (Sess. VI, ch. 9) or that he will persevere to the end (ch. 13). What stands untouched is everything the second certainty named: real, examined, moral confidence about the present, and hope, commanded, about the future. Notice that honest Christians of every tradition live this distinction in practice: they too watch people leave, and can only re-file them afterward. The Catholic simply says in doctrine what everyone concedes at funerals and reunions.

Then the two sins, with the Catechism's real definitions and nothing homemade. **Presumption** comes in two kinds: man presumes upon his own capacities, hoping to save himself without help from on high, or presumes upon God's almighty power and mercy, hoping to obtain forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit (CCC 2091-2092, in substance). **Despair**: man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it, or for the

forgiveness of his sins; it is contrary to God's goodness, his justice, and his mercy (CCC 2091, in substance). Note where the definitions bite: presumption is not confidence, it is confidence *without conversion*; despair is not sadness or dryness or depression, it is the willed verdict that mercy is closed. Say that distinction clearly and someone in your room will breathe for the first time in years: the person fighting dark feelings is not despairing; despair is a decision, and they have not made it.

The live discovery gives both sins the faces the group already loves. Read Matthew 26:33-35: "Though they all fall away because of you, **I will never fall away**... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Ask which sin against hope Peter commits *before* his denial. It is a fitting portrait of presumption: confidence grounded in self ("I will never"), refusing the Lord's explicit warning, and it walked him straight into the courtyard. Judas, the group knows from Session 9, is tradition's gravest warning about despair: remorse that stopped hoping for forgiveness, his final state left to God. And Peter is the whole session in one biography: presumption, fall, grief, hope, restoration, and then a lifetime, until, tradition holds, his own cross in Rome. The last note of the night is Proverbs 24:16: "a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again", plus Sirach's challenge across the ages: consider the ancient generations and see: has anyone trusted in the Lord and been put to shame? (Sir 2:10, in substance). Deuterocanon and all: no one, ever.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalms 42-43 (one poem in two psalms) is the soul arguing itself back to hope: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? **Hope in God**; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God", a refrain the psalmist needs three times, which is its realism: hope in the Psalms is not a mood that descends but a command the downcast soul addresses to itself, repeatedly, mid-tears ("my tears have been my food day and night"). This is the group's script for the dark weeks: talk back to your soul. **Sirach 2:1-11** is Israel's wisdom on the same road: "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation... cleave to him and do not depart... Consider the ancient generations and see: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame?" Trial expected, departure the one forbidden move, and the empirical case for hope: the entire history of everyone who ever trusted. And **Lamentations 3:21-26**, written in the ashes of Jerusalem: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." Hope's Old Testament pedigree is not sunny; it is forged entirely in ruins, which is why it holds.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Letters (1890s)

The Doctor of the little way teaches, in substance and in her letters' own repeated refrain, that it is confidence, and nothing but confidence, that leads to Love; and that what pleases God is the blind hope she keeps in his mercy, even in her final trial of faith, when heaven itself felt closed to her.

St. Thérèse returns tonight on purpose: the empty hands of Session 2 and the crowned gifts of Session 11 resolve here, in confidence. Note her credentials for tonight in particular: she wrote these things while interiorly walking through darkness, which makes her the patron of everyone whose feelings have stopped cooperating with their faith.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Claude de la Colombière

Act of Confidence in God (17th century)

The Jesuit confessor of St. Margaret Mary composed an act of hope the Church has treasured since, praying in substance: My God, I hope in you for grace and for glory, for your mercies' sake, your promises, and your power; you have promised, and you never fail those who hope in you; my confidence itself I place in your keeping.

The move worth showing your group: he anchors hope entirely outside himself, in God's mercy, promise, and power, and then entrusts even his *hoping* to God. That is hope built to survive the hoper's bad days, which is the only kind worth having.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina

Counsels handed down (20th century)

Among the counsels widely handed down from his letters and direction: "Pray, hope, and don't worry." The saint who bore the wounds of Christ for fifty years, heard confessions by the tens of thousands, and battled darkness most of us cannot imagine, compressed the whole spiritual combat into those five words for his anxious children.

Not "feel better." Pray (the means, Session 10), hope (the virtue, tonight), and don't worry (the verdict on anxiety's usefulness). It is Sirach in a Franciscan accent.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1817. Hope defined: desiring the kingdom and eternal life as our happiness, trusting Christ's promises, relying not on our own strength but on the grace of the Holy Spirit. Read it aloud; every phrase was built for tonight.

CCC 1821. We can hope for the glory of heaven promised to those who love God and do his will; in every circumstance, each of us should hope, with God's grace, to persevere to the end. The Catechism commands the very confidence some fear is presumption; the difference is the phrase "with the grace of God."

CCC 2091. Despair, the Catechism's own definition: ceasing to hope for one's personal salvation, for help attaining it, or for forgiveness; contrary to God's goodness, justice, and mercy. A willed verdict, not a dark feeling.

CCC 2092. Presumption, both kinds: upon one's own capacities without help from on high, or upon God's power and mercy, hoping for forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit. Confidence is commanded; confidence without conversion is the sin.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

The oldest debt, paid. 1 John 5:13 has sat on the parking lot list since Session 1. Tonight, retrieve the physical list, read the entry aloud, answer it in full, and cross it off in front of everyone. Eleven weeks of kept promises cash out here; let it be slightly ceremonial.

The "no" guessers, honored. In Session 8's ritual you promised that those who guessed salvation cannot be lost were protecting something true. Tonight names it: God's side never fails; the anchor texts they loved (Jn 10, Rom 8, Phil 1:6) are tonight's certainty of the first kind, granted at full value. Say this explicitly and look at no one in particular.

Peter and Judas complete. Session 9 gave the contrast; tonight gives it doctrinal names, and adds the discovery that Peter's presumption preceded his fall. The study's two recurring faces are now fully lit.

Scrupulosity flag. The despair-versus-dark-feelings distinction is tonight's most pastorally explosive material. If anyone lingers afterward, the one-sentence version: struggling to feel hope while still praying IS hope; despair would have stopped asking. Suggest, gently, that persistent scrupulosity also deserves a regular confessor's care, not just a study group's.

Crown discipline: final week. Two sessions remain. Rev 3:11 stays sealed through Session 13. Almost there.

Session Goals

1. The group receives the full 1 John 5:13 answer and can explain John's own tests for "know."
2. Every participant can state the three certainties and which one Trent declined to promise.
3. Participants discover Peter's presumption in Matthew 26:33-35 themselves and can define both sins against hope in the Catechism's terms.
4. The despair-versus-dark-feelings distinction lands; the struggling hear that their struggle is hope, not its absence.
5. The "no" guessers from Session 8 hear their instinct honored by name.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Lamentations folds into your OT summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the 1 John 5:13 payoff, the Peter discovery, or the despair/feelings distinction; those three are why tonight exists.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have anchored our hope behind the curtain, where Jesus has entered for us. Tonight, steady the anxious among us, sober the overconfident among us, and teach all of us the confidence that leads to Love. We hope in you for grace and for glory: you have promised, and you keep your promises. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of the most reliable person you know. What is the difference between trusting them completely and taking them for granted? Where is the line?
- On the spectrum from "I never worry about my salvation" to "I worry about it constantly," where do you honestly sit, and where did that setting come from?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: begin at the parking lot. Bring the physical list, point to the oldest entry, and say: "Session 1. Someone raises a verse; the study promises it a full night. Eleven weeks of IOUs, and tonight we pay the oldest one." Read 1 John 5:13 aloud.

1. "That you may **know** that you **have** eternal life." John means it. Now read his own letter for his own definition: 1 John 2:3, 3:14, and 4:13. What is John's "knowing" built out of, and what tense is "have"?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

John supplies tests, and they are observable, present-tense things: "by this we may be sure that we know him, **if we keep his commandments**" (2:3); "we know that we have passed out of death into life, **because we love the brethren**" (3:14); "by this we know that we abide in him... **because he has given us of his own Spirit**" (4:13). And "have" is present tense: you may know you have, now, eternal life, the way a healthy person knows they are alive: by the pulse, not by a certificate about the future.

So John's assurance is real, and it is diagnostic: examined, evidenced, present. It sits in the same canon as "let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" without strain, because knowing you are alive today and presuming you cannot die are different acts. The Catholic Church affirms every word of 1 John 5:13, at face value, tonight.

2. Read Romans 5:1-5 and Hebrews 6:17-20. What is hope anchored to, and where is the anchor physically located? Why does that location matter for the anchor's security?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5): the ground of hope is what God has already done, in us, verifiably. And Hebrews: God, "desiring to show... the unchangeable character of his purpose, interposed with an oath," so that we "have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this as a **sure and steadfast anchor of the soul**, a hope that enters into the inner shrine **behind the curtain**, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb 6:17-20).

The anchor's security comes from its location: not fastened to my mood, my streak, or my willpower, but lodged in heaven itself, in the presence of God, held by Jesus who has already entered. Storms happen at the surface, where we are. Anchors hold at the bottom, where he is. That is the first certainty: God's side of this is not a probability.

Live discovery. Say: "Now the two ways hope dies, and you already know both faces. Read Matthew 26:33-35, the table, hours before the courtyard. Peter is about to commit a sin against hope, tonight, before he ever denies anyone. Find it, and name what it is made of."

3. What does Peter claim in Matthew 26:33-35, on what basis, and against what warning? Which sin against hope is this, and what is its opposite twin, whose face the study met in Session 9?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Though they all fall away because of you, **I will never fall away**... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Confidence grounded in himself ("I will never"), overriding the Lord's explicit, detailed warning, and comparative ("though **they** all..."): read in light of that warning, this is a fitting portrait of **presumption**: relying on one's own capacities without help from on high (CCC 2092's first kind). Note the sequence with awe: Peter's presumption came *before* his fall, and walked him into the courtyard whose fire we already know. Presumption is not extra faith; it is hope with its anchor pulled up and stowed in the ego.

Its opposite twin is **despair**, and tradition has always read Judas as its gravest warning: remorse that stopped hoping for forgiveness (CCC 2091, in substance), his final state left to God: contrary, the Catechism says, to God's goodness, justice, and mercy all at once. Two apostles, two sins against hope, one night. And Peter's full biography, presumption, fall, tears, hope, charcoal fire, commission, a shepherd's long life, and at the last, tradition holds, his own cross in Rome, is the whole doctrine walking.

4. Crucial distinction: read Psalm 42:5, 11 and Lamentations 3:21-26. The psalmist's tears are his food; Jerusalem is ashes. Are these men despairing? What are they doing instead, and what does that tell us about dark feelings versus the sin of despair?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

They are doing the opposite of despairing, in the middle of feeling terrible: the psalmist *commands his own soul*: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?... **Hope in God**; for I shall again praise him", and needs the refrain three times, which is the realism; Lamentations *chooses its memory*: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases... new every morning." Hope in Scripture is not a weather system that happens to you; it is an act, addressable to your own downcast soul, performable mid-tears.

So mark the line in permanent ink: **despair is an act of the will, not a feeling**. The Catechism defines it as *ceasing to hope*, a willed verdict that mercy is closed, and culpability for it can be lessened where illness or anguish constrains freedom. Darkness, dryness, anxiety, even depression are not that; the person still praying through them is not despairing, they are hoping heroically, in the Psalms' own style. (And St. Thérèse wrote "confidence and nothing but confidence" from inside a trial of faith in which heaven felt closed. The Doctors of hope earned their doctorates in the dark.) If your struggle is persistent and punishing, add one more means: a regular confessor who knows you; scrupulosity deserves a physician, not just a support group.

Build, Then Press

Leader: full strength, and gently; for some of the room this is personal.

An Evangelical friend says: "**Here is my problem with everything since your Session 7. Assurance is the believer's birthright: 'that you may KNOW you have eternal life.' A child who wonders daily whether Dad will keep him is not in a healthy family; 'you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear' (Rom 8:15). Trent denied assurance, and the fruit is generations of anxious Catholics. Any system where you can't know you're saved until you're dead produces fear, and fear is not the Gospel.**"

5. Grant its pastoral heart entirely. Then answer with tonight's three certainties, and end by asking the friendly question about how assurance actually works on their side of the aisle.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant the heart first and mean it: God does not want his children in servile terror; Romans 8:15 is holy writ; and wherever Catholic culture has produced scrupulous fear instead of filial confidence, it has malformed the doctrine, because the Catechism *commands* hope in every circumstance (CCC 1821), and tonight the Church affirmed 1 John 5:13 at face value, tests and all.

Then the precision: Trent denied infallible *certitude of faith*, absent special revelation, on two points: that I presently stand in grace (ch. 9), and that I will persevere to the end (ch. 13). It never denied assurance itself. Everything else stands: God's promises, absolutely certain, the anchor behind the curtain; my present state, really knowable: John's tests, Paul's commanded self-examination (2 Cor 13:5), and, concretely, the words of absolution spoken over me, which are not a feeling but a fact with a timestamp (Session 9). What no one possesses, apart from special revelation, is a guarantee against his own future betrayal, and Peter's "I will never fall away" is the Gospel's own case study in claiming it.

Then the friendly question, aimed precisely: classical Reformed teaching grounds assurance first in Christ's promise, with self-examination's evidences subordinate, and that account deserves respect (Wesleyan Evangelicals, note, agree with Rome that apostasy is possible). But when a believer does walk away after thirty years, the perseverance account must re-file him: "he was never truly saved" (1 Jn 2:19). At exactly that point its claim about any *living* believer becomes verifiable only at the finish line, and today's walk rests on present faith and its fruits, examined, much as ours does. Functionally, we are both walking by hope; the Catholic is simply saying so in doctrine, and adding the equipment: a tribunal of mercy for the falls, the anchor texts at full value, and a command to hope that binds in every circumstance. That is not a fearful system. It is a father's house with the porch light always on and the door never locked from inside.

DIG DEEPER • The Two Thieves, and an Honest Footnote

A saying long attributed to St. Augustine, though not found in these words in his surviving works, holds the whole night in two sentences: **Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.** Whoever first minted it, the balance is exactly Calvary's: the same crucified Mercy hung between both errors, and one man's dying request was enough (Lk 23:39-43). (The Church, note, has never pronounced on the second thief's final state; the saying's force is warning, not verdict.)

We flag the attribution honestly because this study's promise is that every citation can be trusted; a beloved quote is not exempt. The doctrine, however, is not in doubt: it is CCC 2091-2092 with a cross in the middle.

SEND • Taking It Out

- Which side of the ridge do you naturally slide toward: presumption's "I will never fall," or despair's quiet verdict? What is one concrete practice from tonight that fences your side?
- Who do you love that is living under a closed-mercy verdict they passed on themselves? What could you say or do this week that smells like a porch light?

Live It This Week

Talk back to your soul. Once a day, pray Psalm 42:5 in the first person: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God." Especially on the day you least feel it; that is the psalm working.

Run John's tests, gently. One evening: Am I keeping his commandments? Do I love the brethren? Is his Spirit's fruit anywhere in me? Whatever you find, respond with the matching gift: gratitude, or the confessional, never the closed verdict.

Memorize the five words. "Pray, hope, and don't worry." Deploy on contact with anxiety.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

My God, I hope in you for grace and for glory, because of your mercies, your promises, and your power. Guard us from the confidence that forgets you and from the verdict that forecloses you. Anchor us behind the curtain, where Jesus our forerunner holds fast; and in every circumstance, teach us to hope, with your grace, to persevere to the end. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Romans 5:5 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
1 John 5:13	The parked verse, paid in full (Build Q1)
1 John 2:3; 3:14; 4:13	John's own tests for "know" (Build Q1)
Romans 5:1-5	Hope does not disappoint (Build Q2, memory verse)
Hebrews 6:17-20	The anchor behind the curtain (Build Q2)
Matthew 26:33-35	Live discovery: Peter's presumption before the fall (Build Q3)
Psalms 42:5, 11; 43:5	Commanding one's own soul to hope (Build Q4)
Lamentations 3:21-26	Hope forged in ruins; new every morning (Build Q4)
Romans 8:15	Steelman text: no spirit of slavery (granted)
2 Corinthians 13:5	Examine yourselves: assurance's commanded exam (steelman answer)
1 John 2:19	The re-filing move (steelman answer, friendly question)
Proverbs 24:16	Falls seven times, rises again (leader background)
Sirach 2:1-11	Who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? (OT roots)
Luke 23:39-43	The two thieves (Dig Deeper)